

KIM STANLEY ROBINSON'S "MARTIAN TRILOGY": "THIS IS WHERE WE START AGAIN"

By John C. Tibbetts

Telephone interview, 17 March 1993

"The beauty of Mars exists in the human mind," says one of the astronauts in Kim Stanley Robinson's *Red Mars*. "It's we who understand it, and we who give it meaning."

Kim Stanley Robinson (1951--)—"Stan" to his friends—first encountered the real Mars when he saw the photos from the Viking expeditions in 1977 and 1978. He was then a graduate student at the University of California, San Diego, where he was teaching freshman composition. After earning a master's degree from Boston University and a doctorate from the University of California-San Diego, he began writing the novels and stories which have won him international acclaim, including the Nebula, Asimov, John W. Campbell, and World Fantasy Awards—*The Wild Shore*, *The Memory of Whiteness*, *Pacific Edge* (1990), the "Mars Trilogy." More recent novels include *Antarctica* (1997), a work about ecology, and *Years of Rice and Salt* (2002), an "alternate history" story. In 2010, Robinson will be the guest of honor at the 68th World Science Fiction Convention, which will be held in Melbourne, Australia. He is the very embodiment of the definition of science fiction writing offered by his friend and colleague, James Gunn: "Although science fiction writers may toy with time, putter about in the past, or transport themselves to alternate worlds, their real home is the future."

Note: About the *Mars Trilogy*

Few projects in the history of science fiction have elicited more enthusiastic critical response than Kim Stanley Robinson's "Mars Trilogy" (1992-1994). Adjectives rivaling the hyperbole of Hollywood publicists have sprung up in its wake. Writing in *Locus*, author/critic Gary K. Wolfe calls it "a provocative epic of science versus history, with nature as the arbiter." In *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* John Kessel flatly declared about the first novel in the trilogy, "This is the best novel I've ever read about the colonization of space." *Science Fiction Age* concluded that the series is "the *War and Peace* of science fiction."

Red Mars begins in the year 2026 when a multi-national crew (the "First Hundred") departs Earth for a nine-month voyage to Mars. Each crew member is an expert in the fields of medicine, computer skills, robotics, systems design, architecture, geology, biosphere design, genetic engineering, biology, etc. The project's official mandate, as espoused by the two leaders of the American and Russian teams, Frank Chalmers and Maya Toitovna, is frankly opportunist—to establish a colony on Mars that imitates Earthly models. Within the ranks, however, are dissidents with other goals. Led by the Russian scientist, Arkady, a sort of closet revolutionary, they see in Mars an opportunity for a utopian break from Earth. These growing divisions are temporarily forgotten in the excitement of setting up basecamp, dubbed "Underhill." There's an unforgettable moment when everyone pauses for a breathless first look at the planet. There are no life-forms there. For them, Mars is like a "blank red slate." As the First Hundred quickly establish camp, fashioned from the materiel that had been previously sent by robot rockets, team members sort out their duties: Arkady is in charge of

operations on Phobos, Hiroko Ai, an expert in biosphere design, establishes an experimental colony, and Sax Russell, a systems expert, supervises the terraforming of the surface. Fundamentally opposed to this is Ann Claybourne, the team's geologist, whose long trips across the surface reinforce her respect for the integrity of the planet. She's dismayed at alterations in the planet already evident: This argument over terraforming is one of the central concerns of Robinson's trilogy.

More than three decades pass. It is 2061 and both Mars and Earth are in trouble. Earth is suffering from overpopulation and ecological disaster, while Mars has been transformed from a hostile land into commercially valuable real estate. Robinson leaves no aspect of the colonization untouched, detailing with relentless detail issues involving religion, physics, ecology, technology, city planning, and psychology. But terraforming, exploitation of mineral resources, and waves of immigration representing all ethnic groups, have split Mars into a welter of special interests and ideological subcolonies. The First Hundred, who have discovered a means of prolonging their life spans, have also fallen into ideological squabbles and dangerous confrontations. Earth, meanwhile, is mired down in global warfare, ecological disaster, population explosion, and multi-cultural chaos. Desperate hopes are pinned on Mars as the future of the human race, and the planet becomes involved in what can best be described as a colossal land grab. Led by factions of the First Hundred, a planet-wide revolution breaks out on Mars. Frank Chalmers alone is Mars' last hope. Only he can forge a balance between the transnational opportunists from Earth and the utopian terrorists on Mars. *Red Mars* ends on a note of desperation: The failure of the revolution of 2061 plunges the planet into a dark chaos. Finally, a few survivors reach the southern polar cap where they find a strange underground city, a religious colony that has been secretly established by the biosphere specialist, Hiroko. "This is home," says Hiroko. "This is where we start again."

Green Mars, the second installment in the trilogy, begins in 2090 in Hiroko's south-polar matriarchal sanctuary, two generations after the end of the first book. Although Survivors of the First Hundred like Sax Russell and Ann Claybourne continue to figure prominently in the action, it is clear that Robinson's real concerns lie now with the new generations, those who have been born on the planet, the real Martians. Since the failed revolution, Mars has again come under the control of Earth's neo-feudal metanational corporations. The ruined cities have been rebuilt, the terraforming resumed, and the plundering of Martian resources begun. Mars, in spite of human efforts, is somehow reasserting itself as Mars. This is a major theme underlying all the action of the book.

Blue Mars is structured like the first two, i.e., presented in a series of novella-length parts, each somewhat independent, each seen from the viewpoint of a different character. Many of the First Hundred return, as well as some of the later generation members. The linked-novella form also allows significant jumps in time, important in a story which takes place over almost a century. It rounds out the overall story of the colonization of Mars, and extends the narrative to the future of the rest of the solar system as well. Thus *Blue Mars* has sections set on Earth, on Mercury, and in the moons of Uranus, as well as visits to Venus, the asteroids, and the others of the Outer Planets.

This interview transpired on March 17, 1993. Robinson (1952-) was finishing his "Mars Trilogy" at the time. As Robinson speaks, imagine his home, a kind of Martian

outpost in itself, cluttered with favorite Martian stories by Burroughs, Philip Dick, Fred Pohl, and others. There are stacks of *Science News* pamphlets, a Martian globe, and NASA's *Atlas of Mars*. Revisiting this interview is a "snapshot in time," years before our recent Martian explorations. Yet, his words are indeed prescient.

THE INTERVIEW

JOHN C. TIBBETTS: What is it about Mars that has always attracted us?

KIM STANLEY ROBINSON: I do think that all science fiction writers eventually take on what I call the "other planet" novel, specifically the Mars novel. Until 1976 the most conscientious science fiction writers couldn't really do it right, because they didn't have the data from the Viking missions. So, now, today, we stand on the far side of a giant divide. On this side, we know so much about Mars—about what it looks like and its chemical constitution—that we can talk very specifically about what it would take to terraform it. "Terraforming" is a new idea in history. You read the old philosophers and they don't talk about it because the concept was outside of their experience.

JCT: Most of us have never heard the term before.

KSR: The term was coined by Jack Williamson in the late 1920s in a story for *Astounding* magazine. But since 1976 scientists can actually start crunching numbers on what it would take to transform Mars into a living world. A fascinating thing.

JCT: You seem to debate the issue. The character of "Sax" says we have to spread our "consciousness" around; but Ann objects to turning the planet into a mirror-image of Earth.

KSR: I'm on the seesaw back and forth between the two. One of the things that has energized me in taking on my books is that I can see both these arguments and feel them very strongly, depending on the mood I'm in. There's a part of me thinks this is just a tremendous project, that it ought to be done, and that it is almost like a religious act, like building a cathedral. And there's another part of me that thinks, by analogy, that if somebody wants to change Death Valley like that, I'd be deeply offended. It would be an insult to the intrinsic value of the place as it is now. If you terraform it, you get a garden, a kind of "Disney Mars" that is artificial. You don't have that wilderness, and wilderness is something I very much believe in. But since 1976 more and more scientists have actually started crunching numbers on what it would take to transform Mars into a liveable world.

JCT: All around your room are examples of scientific fact and fiction about Mars.

KSR: I've got a book here called *The Atlas of Mars*, and I've got one of the first commercially available globes of Mars. The atlas was published by NASA as a

government document, which you can buy for about \$10, and it's got very detailed topographical features and some of the names that I use. For about fifteen years now I've been reading a pamphlet called *Science News*, a weekly periodical; it's like a newspaper of all that's happening in the sciences. A general scientific education is part of the job. This is what I find entertaining for me. There's been too much shying away from this in some science fiction. Isaac Asimov was very instructive in this sense. He doesn't fear to just dive off the edge and talk about something for fifty pages at a stretch—just basically talking science. The novel is a very capacious form and it can handle a lot of information. And I go to annual Conferences called “The Case for Mars” in Boulder, Colorado. The American Astronomical Society publishes their proceedings. Mostly people from NASA and from aerospace industry attend.

JCT: And somehow all that dovetails with all those Martian novels on the shelf, I guess.

KSR: You know, I think fantastic narratives and scientific studies feed in to each other very much. The fantasies of people like Edgar Rice Burroughs were based on the hardest data they had at the time, of Schiaparelli and Lowell, i.e., that there might be dying civilizations on Mars. Burroughs use of “atmosphere factories” on Mars may be not too absurd after all. It's rather wonderful that Burroughs understood the concept. I didn't read his books until I was a college undergraduate. I came upon them too late, maybe, to have the same kind of magical link with them that so many others have. It's too bad I didn't run across them when I was younger. Then there was Jules Verne. I thought of him at the time as being one of a kind. I read at least forty of his books, including a lot of the obscure works. In turn, those fantasies became inspirations for scientists like Von Braun. Science fiction and planetary science have been feeding off each other for several generations. When I began writing about Mars myself, I collected as many Martian books as I could, but then I grew reluctant to read them, because I didn't want to be over-influenced by them. You can see that my favorite titles on my shelves are two of Burroughs “John Carter” books, Bradbury's *The Martian Chronicles*, Philip K. Dick's *Martian Time-Slip*, and *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch*, D. G. Compton's *Farewell Earth's Bliss*, Fred Pohl's *Man-Plus*, and Frederick Turner's *The Double Shadow*.

JCT: I would guess the Bradbury book looms large in that list.

KSR: Actually, I only read that a year or so ago. I didn't read it until I had about finished *Red Mars*. And then I realized it had very little relation to my own conception. His main theme was the idea that the Earth explorers will become “Martians” themselves. That's on the last page of his story, “The Martians.” That's the critical passage in all of his book. That indeed is a fundamental realization about what Mars is going to be for us.

JCT: I assume such a massive achievement as your Mars Trilogy must have had a long gestation?

KSR: I started doing the reading for it in the early '80s. I wrote a short story with the title of “Green Mars” then. I started the first novel, *Red Mars* in 1989 and finished it at the end of 1991.

JCT: Did the fact that Mars doesn’t have all the exotic life forms in pulp fiction prove to be troublesome for you?

KSR: True, I had to realize that finding no life at all was the obvious course to take. The scientific evidence is against it. My character of Maya even says at one point that Mars reveals “no touch of a god.” But, you know, I don't think we have a very good understanding of life anywhere, for that matter! What dates previous Mars novels are those kinds of funky, bizarre life forms that we now know can't live there. At best, what could live there is a fairly uninteresting early bacteria, or lichen. That in itself as a plot device won't work. I thought it better to deal with Mars as a place where we start a new human world.

JCT: True, the very process of colonization and terraforming are clearly uppermost in your mind.

KSR: If we really do go there, we'll drag along behind us our cultural baggage. Some nations will try to produce an ideal version of their old national culture; others will try something new and radical. This will be grounds for a whole lot of conflict. In *Blue Mars*, my second volume, I'm preoccupied with those people who are born on Mars. For me, the second or third generation Martian will be much less interested in Earth culture and more absorbed by the new Martian culture, which in itself will be a kind of melting pot. I'm hoping this will serve as the kind of ground out of which a new utopian culture might be built. My three-volume work, in all, presents a mildly positive utopian vision.

JCT: Yet, the first book ends on a pretty bleak note.

KSR: The second and third volumes go beyond that. But it certainly was a bleak beginning, yes. I only can say that when you face history and try to write a realistic book, rather than just a utopian one, you have to include that element. And also, right when I was working on *Red Mars*, we got into the war with Iraq. The world was at such a flash point. Wars happen for such irrational reasons and they get out of control of everybody, including the leadership.

JCT: When will the artists arrive on Mars?

KSR: I wouldn't think they would be there at the beginning.

JCT: Well then, how about writers and poets? What would they write about—Earth:?

KSR: Can you imagine what their realist literature would be like! My God!

JCT: But you certainly include our own artists and visionaries in the place names you give to Mars.

KSR: Yeah, Bradbury Point, Burroughs, Sheffield base and the Clarke asteroid, for example. I would love it if these names eventually got adopted. Names have to be chosen by *someone*. You know, most of the names for Martian features were picked out by Schiafarelli in his first map. It was always a hope of mine that I created something that was compelling enough, that it might have its influences. Their are similar topographical maps for Mercury, you know. The International Association for Astronomers decided to name all the craters and major features on Mercury after great artists, painters, and musicians. So you've got Van Gogh Crater, Rimsky-Korsakov Crater, etc.

JCT: So. . . when will we ever get there?

KSR: I think that NASA of late has been a very disorganized and rudderless organization. They have set the stage for their own failure by not properly defining what they want to do with their program. I think the Space Station is a rather amorphous project and not necessary for getting to Mars. If anything, it slows it down. I know there's a lot of scientists and engineers in the aerospace industry that are frustrated by all this. NASA runs sort of a monopoly on this.

A manned expedition is so far down the pipeline that it's not even being talked about. I have a feeling that the Japanese might be a driving force in this. A construction project there has already designed a Martian town, engineered down to the last detail. The Russians have a tremendous amount of expertise in long-term space projects. And the Americans have NASA's expertise.

JCT: Speaking of the future, what lies ahead for you and the Trilogy?

KSR: The books have been getting an encouraging response, and I still feel like I'm working on the thing. Sort of like one of those Victorian three-deckers. Someone wrote a review and said they were a cross between *Lawrence of Arabia*, *2001*, and *My Dinner with Andre*! I feel like filmmakers could go out to Death Valley and, with modern effects, could make a movie out of this. There are places on Earth that are unbelievably "Martian." Meanwhile, I've been hearing from some writers that they're re-casting their thoughts about their own work. I hope it would make its mark on future Mars novels. Successful novels do make a mark and for awhile afterwards, people have to deal with them.

JCT: Do you ever feel like Burroughs' John Carter, stretching out your arms toward the heavens, yearning to go to Mars?

KSR: Well, I would love to go to Mars myself. I've spent so many years looking at these maps and trying to imagine what it would look like, that I'm very curious at this point to get there!

